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# SUBURBAN IDEALS ON ENGLAND'S INTERWAR COUNCIL ESTATES

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**Abstract:** *This paper looks at how the suburban ideals that were articulated and promoted by interwar politicians and the popular press were interpreted and played out on England's council estates. Focusing upon the domestic garden, it looks at how tenants tried to overcome material and cultural obstacles in their efforts to live up to these standards. Evidence is taken from a range of written, visual, and oral sources related to life on the Wythenshawe Estate, Manchester, and the Downham Estate, South-East London. Ultimately, this paper shows that, despite their best efforts, the residents of England's interwar council estates were unable to achieve the much-publicised 'suburban ideal'.*

## A Suburban Revolution

In historical terms, the suburban expansion that took place in England between the two world wars was unprecedented. In total, over 4 million new suburban homes were built in England between 1919 and 1939, making what had been the most urbanized country in the world at the end of the First World War the most suburbanized by the beginning of the Second World War (Hall, 1984: 18). The seismic nature of this change was not lost on contemporaries; as one garden writer put it in 1934: “we are standing with astonished but hopeful eyes upon the threshold of a new horticultural era of new relations, new ideas, and new values.”<sup>1</sup> Historians too have recognized the significance of this so-called ‘suburban revolution’. In recent years, a number of impressive monographs have investigated and outlined the socio-economic factors (such as falling land costs and rising incomes) that enabled more of the population to move out of the city (Bentley et al., 1981; Brown, 1999). In addition, a number of architectural historians have also shown how the design and layout of suburban developments sought to imitate the romanticized Tudor village (Edwards, 1981; Richardson and Aldcroft, 1968; Thomas, 1972).

One of the key points to emerge from this body of literature is the notion that the typical suburban dwelling, with its mock-Tudor panelling and privet-lined front garden, was designed to fulfil the domestic fantasies of the interwar household (Burnett, 1980: 250–251; Porter, 1996: 372–396; Stevenson, 2009: 10). Nevertheless, the majority of this work has been focused upon privately built suburban developments, with government-subsidized schemes receiving comparatively little attention. This is particularly surprising given that local authorities built over 1 million of all suburban homes in this period (Swenarton, 2002: 267). Equally, relatively few writers have seriously looked at the actual lived experiences of England’s interwar suburbs, nor questioned how far the aspirations of the council estate tenant were the same as those of the private homeowner (Bayliss, 2001: 174–175).

This paper marks an attempt to redress this historical imbalance. In particular, it seeks to ascertain whether or not interwar suburban council estate tenants had

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<sup>1</sup> E. Percy Schofield, ‘Foreword’, in F. Henslow and W. Geoffrey (eds.) *Suburban Gardens* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1934), p. iii.

similar sorts of cultural and material aspirations as those on private suburban estates and, if so, whether they were then actually able to achieve these ideals. To achieve this goal, this paper makes use of a wide range of written, visual, and oral sources relating to life on the Wythenshawe Estate in Manchester and the Downham Estate in South-East London. Although attention is given to the wider cultures and social structures that emerged on these two estates, the main focus of this paper is on the space of the domestic garden and the meanings attributed to it by both tenants and local authorities. As Roberts (1996: 230) notes, semi-detached suburban gardens were a distinctly interwar phenomenon, emerging within and dominating throughout this period; moreover, as Francis and Hester (1991: 2–12) note, suburban gardens also have a great deal of discursive depth too, providing “powerful settings for human life [and] sensual and personal experience.” As such, they provide the perfect locus through which to evaluate the cultural ideals and personal lifestyle aspirations of those who lived on England’s suburban council estates during the interwar period.

### **Local Authority Cottage Estates**

Whereas today the dominant image of the council estate is one of rundown high-rise flats and dingy concrete walkways (Hanley, 2007: 7–20), in the interwar period the emphasis was very much on providing rustic-looking cottages in idyllic out of town developments. Lord Ernest Simon, a prominent figure in the Manchester City Council, summed-up the mood of the period well: “few people doubt that the separate cottage, standing in its own garden, provides by far the best housing for a family.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, throughout this period, local authorities — taking inspiration from the garden city plans and ideals of reformers like Ebenezer Howard — routinely put great emphasis upon laying out houses so as to maximize the amount of open green space and clean air around each household.<sup>3</sup> These sentiments were also buttressed by the Ministry of Health, which laid out strict guidelines stating that houses should be built at

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<sup>2</sup> Ernest Darwin Simon and John Inman, *The Rebuilding of Manchester* (London: Longmans, 1935), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Housing* 1:5 (13 September 1919), p. 66.

no more than 12-to-the-acre in urban areas and 8-to-the-acre in rural areas with a minimum of 70ft between each house.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the British government was also keen to produce homes that would be vastly superior to those that most working-class people had previously experienced, bringing them up closer to the standards enjoyed by the middle classes at this time. As the government-appointed Tudor Walters Committee explained in 1918: “the general standard of accommodation demanded by the working classes has been rising for some time...[therefore] it is only wise economy to build dwellings which, so far as may be judged, will continue to be above the accepted minimum.”<sup>5</sup>

The London County Council (LCC), in particular, had long recognized the benefits of developing out-of-town housing estates. Indeed, prior to the First World War, they had already overseen developments in Poplar, Tooting, Norbury, Tottenham, and Hammersmith — providing housing for well over 25,000 people (Burnett, 1980: 185–187; Porter, 1996: 326–327). Nevertheless, despite these early initiatives, a 1920 report found that over half a million London residents still lived in “unhealthy” or “unsatisfactory” districts.<sup>6</sup> In response to these findings, the LCC drew up a five-year plan in which they outlined their intentions to re-house some 145,000 people in 29,000 new dwellings on out-of-town estates and, in the spring of the same year, they were able to acquire a 575-acre estate at Grove Park, South-East London.<sup>7</sup>

Construction on the new estate began in March 1924 and was completed by 1930. The London-based firm of Holland and Hannan produced the plans, with the emphasis being firmly centred upon creating the kind of rural atmosphere so favoured by Garden-City enthusiasts. Houses were laid out in cul-de-sacs lined by a double row of trees and living rooms were positioned so as to receive as much sunlight as possible (Black, 1981). The gardens themselves conformed to the standards set out by the Ministry of Health, with private back gardens and oblong front gardens enclosed by gates hung on

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<sup>4</sup> Local Government Board: Tudor Walters Committee, Report of the Committee Appointed...to Consider Questions of Building Construction in Connection with the Provision of Dwellings for the Working Classes...&c (London: HMSO, 1918), Cd. 9191, paragraph 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., paragraph 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Housing* II:37 (6 December 1920), pp. 153-54.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

concrete posts and wire fences hidden by privet hedges.<sup>8</sup> In total, over 6,000 dwellings were built on the Downham Estate at a cost of £3,575,000, providing tenants with previously unheard of luxury in three- and four-bedroom cottage-style houses set in suburban seclusion.

Like London, Manchester also adopted and applied a Garden-City outlook to their housing problems during this period. In August 1927, the Manchester Housing Committee appointed Barry Parker to design and plan a new Estate at Wythenshawe. Parker himself was well respected in Garden City circles, and had worked on the projects at Letchworth and Hampstead prior to the First World War (Ravetz, 2001: 59–62). Led by the dominant figure of Lord Ernest Simon, the Committee placed great faith in the healing and redemptive powers of the countryside, even going so far as to declare in one report that: “the tendency of country conditions is to preserve life...the tendency of town conditions is to depress vitality.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, ample gardens were also considered a necessity. As Parker explained:

“The objective is to secure around the house the air space requisite for health, to grow vegetables and fruit for our table...to surround ourselves with pleasant places in which to live and work, rest and play, and to entertain friends.”<sup>10</sup>

Construction was eventually started in 1927 and by 1939 the newly built Wythenshawe Estate contained over a third of Manchester City Council’s interwar housing stock, providing over 35,000 residents with a taste of the suburban lifestyle.<sup>22</sup>

## Middle Class Ideals

For many tenants, the move out to a newly built cottage estate was understood as an opportunity to improve their social standing and become more ‘respectable’ (Gunn and Bell, 2002). With regards to the Wythenshawe Estate, it is possible to gain an insight into these sorts of aspirations thanks to the large number of oral testimonies and autobiographical accounts that have been left by

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<sup>8</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/HSG/GEN/1/30.

<sup>9</sup> Norman Macfadyen, ‘The Need for New Towns’, in *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society* (1926–27), p. 133.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Dean Hawkes, *Modern Country Homes in England: The Arts and Crafts Architecture of Barry Parker* (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), p. 120.

former tenants.<sup>11</sup> On top of this, further details can be gleaned from the memoirs and testimonies that have been produced by the former residents who came together in the 1990s to form the Wythenshawe Forum Writers Association. In a similar fashion, former residents of the Downham Estate came together in the early 1990s to share and write down their memories of life on the early estate. A selection of their testimonies can be found in Antonia Rubinstein's remarkable collection, *Just Like the Country* (1991).

In one such testimony, Rosina Evans, who moved to the Downham Estate as a young girl, recalls how desperate her mother was to make their new home "tasteful". As she recollected: "my mother had aspirations which my dad didn't agree with and she bought a walnut veneer bedroom suite which was like something out of a novel" (Rubinstein et al., 1991: 31). Unsurprisingly, Rosina's father was furious: "my Dad was dead against it...he would have spent any amount of money on the garden and allotment, but the home, oh no!" (Rubenstein et al., 1991: 31). This passage is particularly revealing not only for what it tells us about the tensions created by working women's desire to improve themselves, but also because of the father's apparent readiness to spend money on improving the garden. Indeed, it seems that on both the Wythenshawe and Downham Estates most families opted to allocate what limited money they had on ensuring that their gardens at least came up to a respectable standard.

Of course, another reason for directing so much time and effort towards the appearance of one's garden was because it was by some distance the most public and visible part of the house. Indeed, in many ways it came to occupy the role that the front room or parlour had played as the 'best room' in the traditional pre-1914 working-class terraced house.<sup>12</sup> Aesthetically, the most important feature was undoubtedly the herbaceous border. Prominent in Britain during the Victorian period, the herbaceous border massed together different flowers and plants to create dramatic effects through colour, shape, or scale. Although initially largely seen in stately gardens of the elite or in large public parks, they had become more widespread by the interwar period

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<sup>11</sup> The Manchester Studies Tapes Collection is currently held in the Local Studies Department at the Tameside Central Library. For more details on their work see: 'Manchester History Workshop (22-24 April 1977)', in *History Workshop Journal* 4:1 (1977), pp. 238-39.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Front Parlour', in *Garden Suburbs, Villages and Homes* 2:3 (1912), p. 83.

(Clayton-Payne and Elliot, 2000: 123–138). Popular gardening magazines regularly featured full-page spreads on the different types of flower one could plant, whilst the writings and sketches of garden designers such as Gertrude Jekyll, who contributed over 1000 articles to magazines such as *Country Life* and *The Garden* (Lewis, 2000), brought the beauty of the herbaceous border to an ever expanding audience (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Herbaceous border with different types of antirrhinums; *Homes and gardens* (June, 1935), p. 41.

Works such as this, along with titles such as *Homes and Gardens* and *Amateur Gardening*, were overtly aspirational in tone, providing technical know-how, recommended plans and designs as well as advice on good taste (Roberts, 1996: 230). For instance, as one spread in *Homes and Gardens* put it:

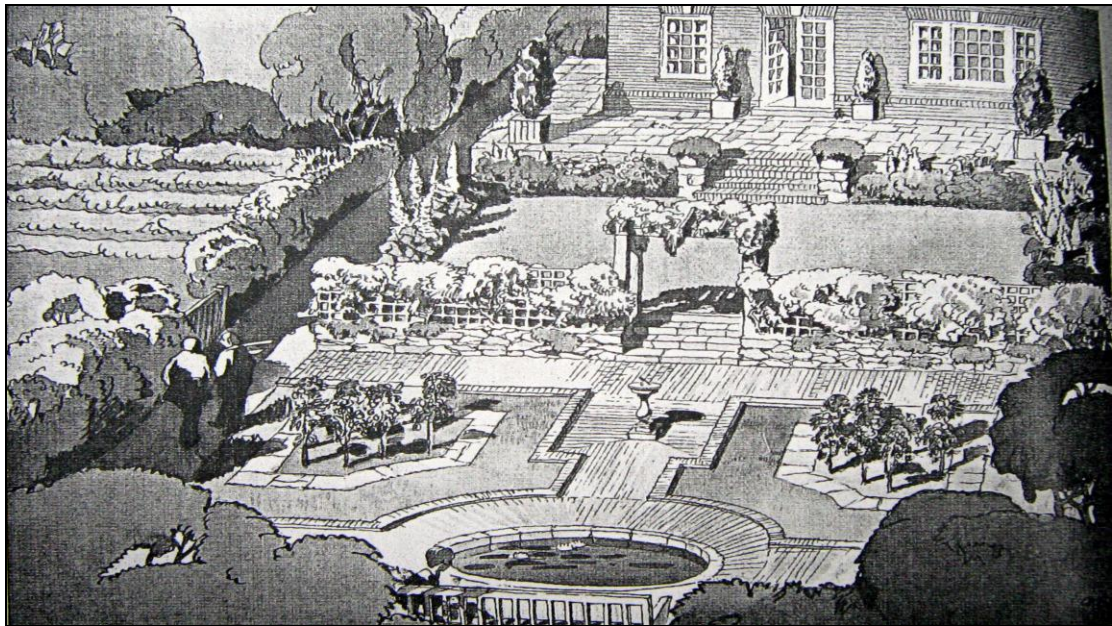
“Though such large and impressive are often inclined to be passed over by the amateur as being beyond his scope, they undoubtedly serve as examples of the effects that can be achieved on a smaller scale.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Homes and Gardens* (June 1935), p. 41.



As publications such as these stressed the trick to achieving a truly beautiful herbaceous border lay in how one arranged the different flowers. Readers of *The Complete Amateur Garden*, for instance, were advised to “plant a limited number of trees, shrubs, and plants, giving every one a chance to display its value.”<sup>14</sup> In most cases, controlled and restrained beauty was the desired look, with “wild” and “natural” looking flowers preferred to bolder and gaudier plants (Brown, 1999: 8). Working within one’s limits was important also; as *Homes and Gardens* magazine reminded its readers: “remain faithful to a scheme of harmonious shades rather than launch out into planting contrasts.”<sup>15</sup> Great importance was also placed upon deciding where to plant the flower borders.<sup>16</sup> The March 1927 edition of *Homes and Gardens* magazine even featured one possible layout that its readers could imitate (see Figure 2). Featuring a lily pool, archway and trelliswork, the idea behind this elaborate scheme was to maximize the impact of the flowerbeds by dividing up the garden, allowing for different effects to be achieved in different areas.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 2: Suggested layout for a small garden plot by E. W. Hall; *Homes and Gardens* (March, 1927), pp. 374-75.**

<sup>14</sup> Harry Higgott Thomas, *The Complete Amateur Gardener* (London: Cassell and Company, 1924), pp. 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> *Homes and Gardens* (June 1935), p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Hadfield Farthing, *Saturday in my Garden: A Practical Guide to the Cultivation of Small Gardens*, 9th Edition (London: Richards Press, 1932), pp. 20-22.

<sup>17</sup> *Homes and Gardens* (March 1927), pp. 374-75.



Despite their best and most sincere efforts, however, tenants on both Estates found it hard to live up to these ideals. One of the main problems was a lack of space. Surviving pictures and descriptions of gardens on the two Estates reveal the remarkable lengths they went to in their attempts to emulate the designs they saw in the popular press (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Pictures of two particularly elaborate front gardens on the Downham Estate taken in July 1931. London Metropolitan Archives. SC/PHL/02 – A8111 and A8108.**

As the above images highlight, elaborate use was made of trelliswork, paving and border layout in an effort to achieve something similar to the *Homes and Gardens*' 1927 layout. Nevertheless, the effect is clearly not the same. Whereas

the idealized gardens evoke a sense of calmness and restrained beauty, the two Downham gardens are literally swamped by their herbaceous borders. The trelliswork too seems to be crammed in, producing a kind of claustrophobic environment rather than the open and spacious ambience evoked in the pages of the gardening manuals. In fact, writers and garden designers often criticized those gardens that tried to do too much in too small a space.<sup>18</sup> Barry Parker, for one, was especially critical of the way that interwar tenants were overloading their gardens. In his view, the gardener should “tend towards simplicity and directness...lessening his risk of falling into a vulgarity almost inseparable from superfluity” (Hawkes, 1986: 71).

In a similar vein, trying to plant too many different varieties of flowers could, according to the gardening press, lead to equally disastrous results and “overtly conspicuous displays.”<sup>19</sup> Criticisms such as this uncover the presence of a subtle and shifting discourse of ‘taste’, which many council estate tenants clearly struggled to decipher. Marguerite James tried to help confused gardeners by providing a whole section on ‘the language of flowers’ in her 1937 book *The Family Garden*, describing how chrysanthemums represented “truth”; marigolds “grief”; dahlias “instability”; antirrhinums “presumption”; bluebells “constancy”; and so forth.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, despite this sort of guidance, lower-class gardeners continued to be ridiculed for their lack of taste, with particular vitriol reserved for their apparently insatiable infatuation with ‘tacky’ garden ornaments. George Orwell, for example, recorded with a growing sense of despair the increasing number of suburban gardens that contained “rock features, concrete bird baths, crazy paving...and red plaster elves.”<sup>21</sup> Archival evidence from this period confirms that such ornamentation was certainly present on the Downham Estate, with one former resident recollecting “seeing some gardens up at Woodbank Road...one was with a little bridge, gnomes and things, and that fascinated me (Black, 1981: 68) Moreover, the local newspapers in both areas were full of

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas, *The Complete Amateur Gardener*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Cecil Henry Middleton, *Mr Middleton Talks about Gardening* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), pp. 108, 246.

<sup>20</sup> Marguerite James, *The Family Garden* (London: George G. Harrap & Co, 1937), pp. 152-54.

<sup>21</sup> George Orwell, *Coming up for Air* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1948), p. 218.

advertisements for the latest styles of gates, fences, sheds and crazy paving.<sup>22</sup> An unfortunate situation arose, therefore, whereby those tenants on both the Wythenshawe and Downham Estates who tried to demonstrate their newly achieved sense of 'respectability' by spending their limited earnings on beautifying their gardens often only succeeded in reinforcing their working-class identities in the eyes of those who they sought to emulate.

### **Garden Shows and Class Hierarchies**

Historians have often suggested that the interwar council estate heightened class feeling by further radicalizing the middle- and upper-classes in the defence of their property and way of life against an (imagined) invasion by 'slum dwellers' (Olechnowicz, 1997: 10). The problem with such arguments, however, is that they often smooth over the complex and contested terrain on which the interwar class system rested. Indeed, throughout this period, 'class' was an inherently unstable category, dependent upon a intricate assortment of cultural ideas, social codes and ways of behaving, and what one person viewed as being 'middle class' another might interpret as being typically 'working class' (Thompson, 1980). In addition, subjecting the interwar class system to rigid categorizations also overlooks the complex and varied ways in which council estate tenants constructed elaborate and subtle hierarchies amongst themselves (Savage, 1993). Indeed, whilst to many outsiders the houses on a council estate might all have looked much alike, for those who lived there the tiniest differences in size or layout were often invested with huge significance (Hayes, 2009: 137–138). To give one example, on the Downham Estate, one former tenant remembered how she had been keen to secure a corner house, because, unlike the other houses on the street, they had their own path and separate side entrances (Rubenstein et al., 1991: 26). As examples such as this highlight, subtle differences in layout and appearance often took on great importance among tenants, functioning as markers for one's standing in the self-contained micro-class system of the council estate.

One of the most ritualized ways in which tenants on both the Downham and Wythenshawe Estates sought to establish hierarchies among themselves was by setting-up and partaking in annual garden shows. The first garden show on the

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<sup>22</sup> See for example, *The Bromley Mercury* (17 July 1931), p. 6.

Downham Estate took place in July 1931, with prizes of champagne awarded for the best flower garden, the best vegetables, and the best flower and vegetable gardens.<sup>23</sup> Similar competitions also took place on the LCC's other cottage estates during this period (Rubenstein et al., 1991: 37). Wythenshawe followed suit too, hosting its first 'Garden Week' in the summer of 1934, with the trophies presented at the local primary school by Lady Simon.<sup>24</sup> As reports from this period outline, these competitions proved extremely popular with local residents, who spent much of the year preparing for them.<sup>25</sup>

In all of these competitions, great importance was attached to ensuring that every tenant was aware of the standards that they were being judged against. In Wythenshawe, flyers were posted around in early August, laying out the criteria for the upcoming garden competition. These were as follows: (1) Best cultivated and cleanest gardens, front and back; (2) The nature of the soil and situation; (3) The length of time the house has been occupied; (4) Any assistance by professional gardeners; (5) The amount of money spent; points awarded in proportion to outlay.<sup>26</sup> Thanks to these guidelines, every tenant on the Wythenshawe Estate was able to work from the same rulebook; likewise, they were also left in no doubt as to what constituted a 'respectable' garden. The LCC were just as keen to ensure that all participants in their garden shows were operating within a clearly demarcated framework of decorum. For example, in the spring of 1934, each Downham resident was provided with *A Handbook of Useful Information for Tenants*, which, among other things, outlined how:

"A garden can be made to look attractive by the expenditure of a few shillings annually...strive to obtain a natural, rather than artificial, effect...purchasing seedlings and young plants such as Stocks, Antirrhinums, Clarkia, [and] Violas."<sup>27</sup>

Tenants were also left in no doubt that the quality of their gardens was taken to be a marker of their personal qualities and moral fortitude. For example, in the programme for the second Wythenshawe garden show entrants were reminded that "nothing great is ever won without toil" and that "beautiful gardens make

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<sup>23</sup> *Kentish Times* (17 July 1931).

<sup>24</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (16 July 1934), p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Manchester Evening Chronicle* (1 March 1934).

<sup>26</sup> Papers of Lady Simon of Wythenshawe, Manchester Archives M14/1/15/23.

<sup>27</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/LCC/HSG/GEN/3/12.

happy homes.”<sup>28</sup> Signifying more than just stylistic tastes or preferences, the domestic garden in this sense increasingly came to function as a synecdoche for the respectability of the household that had cultivated it (Bhatti, 2006: 323). Tenants too quickly became adroit at reading deeper meanings into the way that fellow residents cared for their gardens. Elizabeth Knight, for example, remembered how her father was quick to identify their new neighbours as “rag and bone people” by virtue of the fact that they did not have any roses or marguerites in their garden (Rubenstein et al., 1991: 52). Indeed, in many ways, the garden shows were only the most public manifestation of this deeper longing to achieve ‘respectability’ in the eyes of one’s neighbours and peers, with prize-winning gardens providing tangible proof of one’s superiority and upward mobility. Thus, rather than simply being a space that encouraged healthier living, as the Local Authorities had hoped for, the domestic garden increasingly came to function as the battleground upon which competing notions of taste and class were played out and contested, absorbing the tenants of both Estates into complex hierarchies of class and social standing in the process.

### **The Private Residence?**

In her speech at the inaugural Wythenshawe Garden Show in 1934, Lady Simon was keen to heap praise upon the great efforts that the tenants had put into their displays: “a private garden is a public service, and the way in which you are developing your gardens is adding something to the amenities of the district.”<sup>29</sup> Most revealing about this passage is the tension that seems to exist between knowing whether to treat the council estate garden as a private space or a public one. Such confusion is all the more striking because, as garden historians such as Judith Roberts (1996: 231) have noted, the privately-owned interwar suburban garden played a pivotal role in creating opportunities for greatly enhanced privacy and individual creative expression. Stylistically, too, they tended to be pastiches of idealized country house gardens, representing nostalgia for a safer, cosier, and more reserved way of life (Simms, 2009: 4). Moreover, in popular culture the semi-detached domestic garden was commonly used as a metaphor for the type of private and secluded existence that the suburbs were seen to

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<sup>28</sup> Manchester Archives, M14/1/26; M14/1/11.

<sup>29</sup> *Altrincham Adviser* (24 August 1934).

encourage (Gunn and Bell, 2002: 66). For instance, in George and Weedon Grossmith's widely-read satire of suburban life *The Diary of a Nobody*, which first appeared as a serial in *Punch* magazine in 1892, the central character — the unfortunate Mr Pooter — would often be depicted pottering around his little garden, caring for his flower beds.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, prominent writers such as Virginia Woolf and George Orwell similarly also mocked the insularity that the newly laid out cottage-style suburbs encouraged.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Alison Light (1991: 211) has gone so far as to suggest that one of the defining features of the interwar period was the rise of a new kind of Englishness based upon “private and retiring people, pipe- smoking “little men” with their quietly competent partners, a nation of gardeners and housewives.”

Nevertheless, despite the similarities that writers such as Orwell saw in appearance between the privately-owned cottage estate and the council-owned cottage estate, there remained a great disparity in the amount of freedom that council estate gardeners were afforded in comparison to their middle-class peers. Residents of the Wythenshawe and Downham Estates were reminded of this distinction every time they opened their rent book and saw the tenancy conditions printed out on the back page. As well as informing them of when to pay their rent, the conditions stipulated that each tenant was to ensure that their gardens were kept in a “neat and cultivated” condition.<sup>32</sup> Particular concern was shown towards the conditions of the hedges and fences as they were the most public features of the gardens, abutting out onto the road for all to see. Residents on the Wythenshawe Estate, for example, were instructed to “cut all grass and trim or prune trees, shrubs, and hedges at the proper season and when necessary,” and were simultaneously warned that the Council would undertake such duties if necessary.<sup>33</sup> Tenants on the Downham Estate were similarly instructed to make sure they gave the Council's staff “reasonable facilities for maintaining and cutting the hedges abutting on roads.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1940), pp. 40-42.

<sup>31</sup> See Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: vol. 1, 1915-1919* (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/LCC/HSG/GEN/3/12.

<sup>33</sup> A copy of the ‘Conditions of Tenancy’ is reprinted in A. B. Hill, *Memories of Wythenshawe from the 1930s to the 1960s* (Manchester: Neil Richardson, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/LCC/HSG/GEN/3/12.

Although gardeners on some private cottage estates, such as the Hampstead Garden Suburb, also had to adhere to certain design restrictions when it came to the laying out hedges and fences, these were in no way as draconian as those imposed upon the residents of the Wythenshawe and Downham Estates; reinforcing the differences that existed between the interwar council estate tenant and the middle-class home owner. Indeed, whereas the home became a fortress for those who could afford it, interwar cottage estate tenants were left under no illusions as to the fact that their homes were liable to be inspected at any time of the day (Thompson, 1982: 23).

As Amanda Vickery (2009: 29) notes, domestic perimeters and boundaries are also important because the house has long been seen as a universal metaphor for the person and the body. As such, the practical ways in which the superintendents on both Estates actually went about managing the boundaries of the garden can tell us much about the extent to which they valued and respected the privacy of the council estate tenant. Some indication of the Wythenshawe Special Committee's views can be gaged from the fact that, in 1934, they decided to appoint an Estate overlooker, who was "an experienced gardener" to "continually inspect the gardens."<sup>35</sup> Likewise, the rent man was also instructed to be on the "look-out for misdemeanours."<sup>36</sup> As surviving evidence reveals, neither seems to have had much compunction about invading or intruding onto the tenant's personal space. Muriel Taylor, for example, recollected how in the early 1930s her husband got into trouble when he erected a gate to prevent their children from straying into the main road. As it turned out, her husband simply left the gate as it was and "somehow or other they never bothered [removing it]."<sup>37</sup> Others were not let off so lightly. In 1932, Mr Pennington received a notification informing him to remove a trellis that he had erected alongside his path on which to grow his sweet peas. He too ignored the inspector's directive but upon returning home one day "found it lying on the floor — they'd sent two men to pull it down and they'd just pulled it down."<sup>38</sup> A similar incident occurred to Charlie Hammond (another former Wythenshawe resident), who was told by the council that if he did not remove

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<sup>35</sup> Papers of Lady Simon, Manchester Archives M14/1/15/20.

<sup>36</sup> Manchester Tape Collection, Tameside Central Library, LSD/Tape 123.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., Tape 117.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Tape 56.



the trellis he had erected to keep his boy off the flower pots then they would send someone round to take it down.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, the types of punishments that were dished-out to Mr Pennington and Charlie Hammond tended to be the exception. For example, only six notices to quit were actually served for “non-cultivation of garden” in the whole of the Manchester District between 1921 and 1933.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, more often than not, the threat of disciplinary action was by itself enough to bring tenants into line (Donzelot, 1979). Mrs Sheppardson’s testimony is particularly revealing in this sense:

“They had these estate people going round, mind you it wasn’t a lot of snooping but, still, there was, [a sense] you knew what hadn’t to be done so you didn’t do it.”<sup>41</sup>

Beatrice Kitchen (a former Downham resident) similarly remembers how tenants would pass the word round (“the inspectors are coming!”) every time one of them saw a superintendent approaching (Rubenstein et al., 1991: 41). Indeed, the whole regulatory process was one that was very much carried out in the public sphere. In London, for example, the inspectors were always highly visible as they rode around the estates on their bicycles each morning (Rubenstein et al., 1991: 42). Equally, the great emphasis placed upon removing all visual impairments (trelliswork, overgrown hedges, etc.) ensured that each garden — and by extension each tenant — was made visible to the scrutiny of the passer-by.

This emphasis upon public visibility also extended to concerns over how the appearance of the individual garden fitted in with the overall aesthetic of the rest of the estate; as Barry Parker put it: “the garden is to bring the house into harmony with its surroundings” (Hawkes, 1986: 113). In fact, on both Estates, the ideal was to achieve harmonious and uniform design from which all incongruous elements were absent. In Manchester, the tenancy agreement stipulated that any tenant wishing to make “significant alterations” to their garden, such as chopping down or planting a new tree or erecting any sort of permanent structure (such as a shed), had first to gain written permission from

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Tape 116.

<sup>40</sup> Papers of Lady Simon, Manchester Archives M14/1/15/20.

<sup>41</sup> Manchester Tape Collection, Tape 116.

the Council.<sup>42</sup> An almost identical policy was adopted on the Downham Estate.<sup>43</sup> On a practical level, this meant that opportunities for individual self-expression were once again hindered. If, as Thompson (1982: 8) suggests, it was only in the kind of house where the occupants could distance themselves from the outside world by hiding behind their garden fences that the suburban lifestyle of individual domesticity could take hold, then clearly the emphasis put on presenting a uniform frontage only served to make this aspiration all the more unattainable for the interwar tenant.

One further point of note in this respect is that, on both Estates, the Local Authorities seem to have been keen to show-off these carefully managed, uniform layouts. In 1937, for example, the Wythenshawe Special Committee decided to produce an official brochure about the estate, replete with pictures of the most attractive gardens.<sup>44</sup> A similar pamphlet was produced by the LCC.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the Manchester City Council started taking important dignitaries on organized tours of Wythenshawe, as it was considered the most beautiful estate in the district. In June 1936, for example, members of the North of England division of the Town Planning Institute were taken on an open top bus ride around the Estate.<sup>46</sup> Overall, visitors seem to have been impressed. When Mr P. Fraser of the overseas delegates of the Empire Parliamentary Association visited he was said to have “noted with surprise that the number of neglected gardens was insignificant.”<sup>47</sup> The fact that dignitaries such as Fraser were afforded the opportunity to inspect and gaze into the gardens of Wythenshawe homes offers further proof of the disparity that existed between the privately owned suburban home and the council-owned one. Whereas suburban homeowners were able to hide behind their privet hedges and live secluded (and often ridiculed) lives, cottage estate tenants were constantly aware that they were on show, being judged and scrutinized by a host of official and unofficial inspectors, making the ideal of a private residence little more than a dream.

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<sup>42</sup> Minutes of the Wythenshawe Estate Special Committee: vol. 2 (17 March 1932), pp. 4-5. Manchester Archives.

<sup>43</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/LCC/HSG/GEN/3/12.

<sup>44</sup> Minutes of the Wythenshawe Estate Special Committee: vol. 5 (25 August 1937), p. 118.

<sup>45</sup> London County Council, *London Housing* (London: County Hall, 1937).

<sup>46</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (13 June 1936).

<sup>47</sup> *Manchester Guardian* (24 July, 1935).

## Family Values

In the eyes of many interwar social reformers, the suburban house was believed to actively encourage family values. As Garden City enthusiasts like Norman McKellen put it: “if a family is in possession of a comfortable self-contained private house it has the first condition of happiness, family life can run its established course [and] self-respect and family pride are encouraged.”<sup>48</sup> Local Authorities were just as keen to preserve the integrity of the nuclear family, with the Manchester County Council stipulating that a “dwelling house” should be taken to mean “a house designed for use as a dwelling for a single family.”<sup>49</sup> Gardens and other open spaces were deemed to be important as they ensured that houses — and, by extension, families — remained independent and distinct from one another. Again, there was a sense that housing reformers were trying to emulate and imitate the domestic ideals and lifestyles of interwar middle-class suburban families, with the emphasis being given to smaller families and more stable marriages (Bourke, 1994: 197). Accordingly, and in line with the recommendations laid out by the government, Local Authorities devoted their attentions to providing three-bedroomed dwellings designed to house healthy and happy nuclear families.

Once again, it is evident that there was a strong desire amongst many tenants to live up to these familial ideals. Whereas in their previous inner-city terraced developments most tenants had tended to socialise in the pub or in the street, the move out to the cottage estate seems to have been accompanied by a desire to indulge in new, more family-centred, pastimes.<sup>50</sup> Gardening, in particular, became a popular family pastime for many. Theresa Matthews, for instance, recalls how much time people on the Downham Estate devoted to their gardens: “most of them pottered about in their gardens, grew their roses and their asters...certainly my dad [did], he was always sawing up bits of wood and chopping up things and making fences” (Black, 1981: 69). Theresa’s father was not unique in this respect; a survey conducted by the Manchester and Salford Better Housing Council in 1935 found that over 90% of tenants approved of their gardens.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> N. McKellen, 'Housing the People', in *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society* 101 (1934), p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Minutes of the Wythenshawe Estate Special Committee: vol. 1 (16 July 1931), p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Manchester Tape Collection Tape 67.

<sup>51</sup> Manchester and Salford Better Housing Council, *Wythenshawe: The Report of an Investigation*

Of course, many spent more time with their families because there was little else to do.<sup>52</sup> Often this was the result of a deliberate policy by the Local Authorities to restrict opportunities for partaking in what they considered to be 'disreputable' leisure pursuits such as drinking and gambling (Constantine, 1981: 390). Instead, they actively sought to encourage more domesticated leisure pursuits — such as gardening — by limiting the number of pubs and shops on the new cottage estates (Hughes and Hunt, 1992: 96). Popular writers and journalists were also quick to encourage readers to stay clear of pubs and dance halls and to take up nobler hobbies such as gardening instead, portraying it as “an unexampled developer of the faculties: observation, ingenuity, foresight and alertness.”<sup>53</sup> Evidence suggests that British families were receptive to these sentiments, with close to 80% of all English households partaking in some form of gardening in this period.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, caring for a garden was literally depicted as being analogous to caring for a family: “young tress and young shrubs only demand, like other children, to be loved and kept clean and tidy until they arrive at an age when they are able to keep themselves clean and tidy.”<sup>55</sup>

Historians have tended to stress that the increasing popularity of gardening and other similar family activities was, in large part, linked to a reduction in working hours and an increase in disposable income (Stevenson, 2009: 34–35). These, however, were luxuries that few council estate tenants could enjoy. Money was tight for many families, especially for those who were made redundant in the economic downturn (Rubenstein et al., 1991: 63). During the 1930s, for example, the average Wythenshawe family earned about £3 a week, which after rent (about 15s per week), bus fares (about 4s per week), and food bills had been taken out, did not leave them with much spare cash to spend on their gardens.<sup>56</sup> Time was also an issue, especially for those who had to make the long commute into the centre of Manchester or London. Indeed, so time consuming was gardening that it sometimes had the unintended effect of putting extra strain on family relations. For instance, one ex-Wythenshawe

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(Manchester: Manchester and Salford Better Housing Council, 1934), p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Manchester Tape Collection Tape 63.

<sup>53</sup> Farthing, *Saturday in my Garden*, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Cuthbert Eley, *Twentieth-Century Gardening* (London: Country Life Ltd, 1939), p. 12.

<sup>55</sup> James, *The Family Garden*, p. 145.

<sup>56</sup> These figures come from the study made by the Manchester Women's History Group. See Hughes and Hunt, 'A Culture Transformed', p. 86.

tenant recollected that his devotion to the garden eventually led to his family leaving the Estate altogether:

“It upset my wife in the end because although I was home, to her I wasn’t home because I was in the garden, especially in the summer or spring, and every minute I was outside doing something...and she used to say ‘you’re not with me anymore’.”<sup>57</sup>

No space better epitomises the difficulties that council estate tenants faced in living up to the familial ideals of the middle classes than the back garden. Social reformers and popular writers typically presented it as a space that could (and should) be entirely given over to leisure time with the family (Bentley, 1981: 136–140). Often, it was depicted as an extension of the family living room or lounge with the gardening magazines of the time featuring full-page spreads of the latest designs in garden furniture and pictures showing how the children of the wealthy relaxed in their back gardens (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Photograph of children playing in the grounds of Thorpe Hall, Essex: *Homes and Garden* (June 1935), p. 13.

The popular garden writer Margueritte James similarly encouraged readers to provide sandpits and miniature plots for their children in her 1937 book *The Family Garden*.<sup>58</sup> For many interwar tenants, however, the wants of their children

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<sup>57</sup> Manchester Tape Collection Tape 56.

<sup>58</sup> James, *The Family Garden*, p. 261.

came second to the need to provide more food for the family. Mr Sheppardson, for example, cordoned off his back garden to grow blackcurrant bushes and potatoes.<sup>59</sup> Another ex-Downham resident recollected that her dad used to grow cabbages and also kept chickens in their back garden (Black, 1981: 69).

Such practical usage of the back garden sat uncomfortably with the messages that emanated from the popular gardening press, which more often than not sought to distance the suburban garden from any reference to the productive, income-subsiding, garden of the worker (Roberts, 1996: 235). As many parents on the two Estates also forbade their children from playing in the front garden (largely, for fear that they might damage the lovingly cared-for herbaceous borders) the reality was that very few households actually ever indulged in any sort of 'family activities' in their gardens, meaning that, once again, the suburban ideal remained practically unrealizable for most tenants.<sup>60</sup>

### **A Sense of Repose**

One word that interwar politicians, architects, and writers were particularly fond of using when articulating their domestic ideals was 'repose'; indeed, according to Barry Parker, "the first essential in the form and design of any decorative object" was "resposefulness."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the prominent garden writer Harry H. Thomas was also of the opinion that "if a garden is to be really enjoyable it must create a sense of repose."<sup>62</sup> Dating from the 1500s, the term has a dual meaning; it can be used to describe the state of being at peace or at rest, or it can be used to define someone or something that is dignified or composed — both qualities that the garden, above any other part of the house, was meant to embody.<sup>63</sup>

As this paper has outlined, however, for the residents of Downham and Wythenshawe, such ideals tended to remain unrealizable during the interwar period. In large part, this was due to the fact that the day-to-day practicalities of life on the interwar council estate threw up too many obstacles. Likewise, many tenants did not have the money to invest in their homes, whilst others simply

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<sup>59</sup> Manchester Tape Collection Tape 56.

<sup>60</sup> Manchester Tape Collection Tape 63.

<sup>61</sup> Barry Parker, *Our homes* (Buxton, 1895), p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas, *The Complete Amateur Gardener*, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Eley, *Twentieth-Century Gardening*, p. 52.

lacked the time. Nowhere better embodied these difficulties than the domestic garden. Spatially, it provided a setting within which debates over the boundaries between the public and the private, the family and the community, and the individual and the state were articulated, conceptualized, and renegotiated. Its use, and misuse, bore witness to the fact that the imagined ideal of 'a sense of repose' was simply not feasible for most. As a result, the kind of floricultural bliss that middle- and upper-class gardeners were able to enjoy remained something to which interwar tenants could only gain access through the pages of books and magazines.

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